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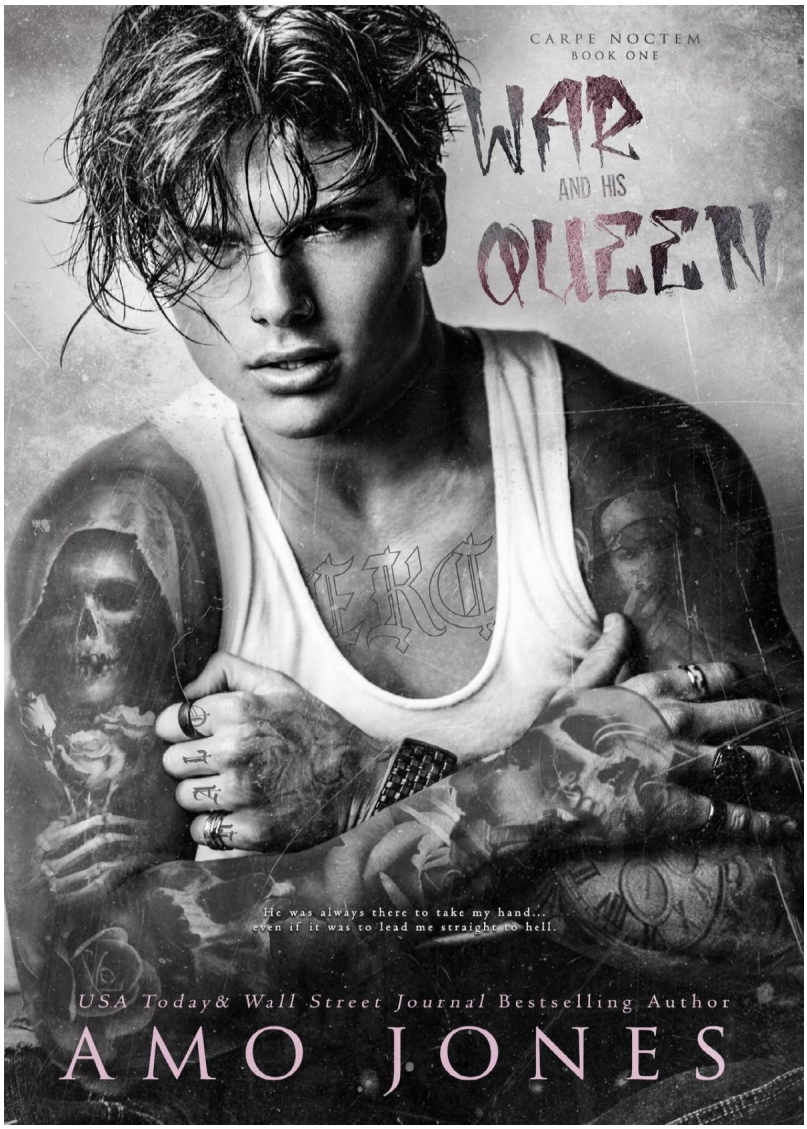

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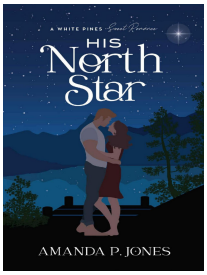

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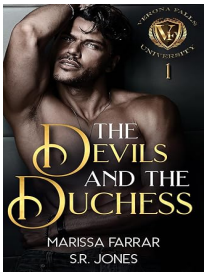

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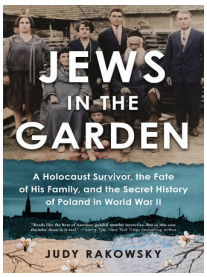

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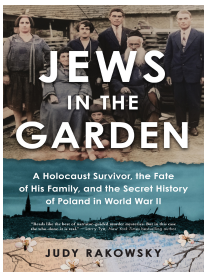

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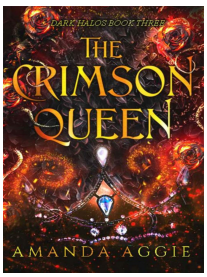

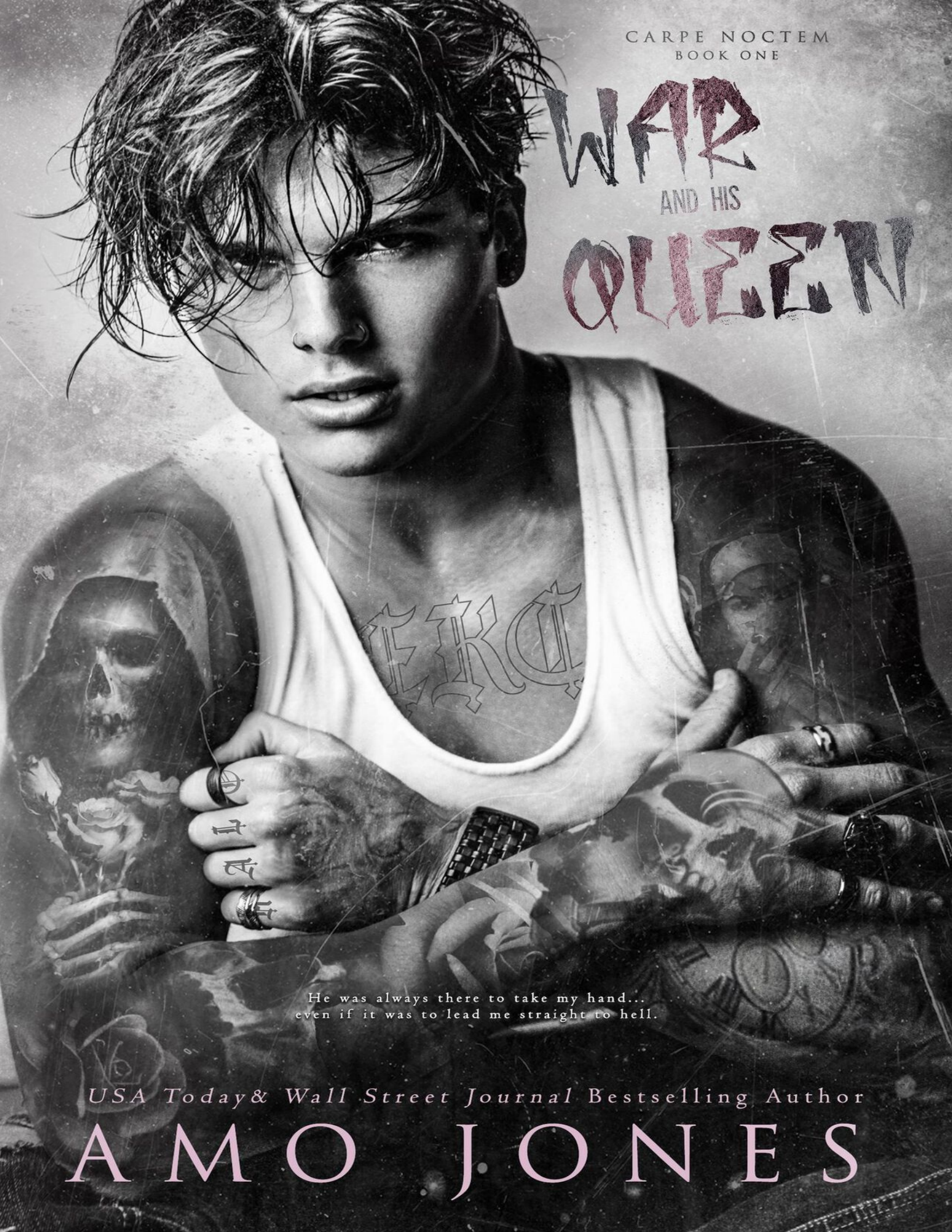
CARPE NOCTEM
BOOK ONE
WAR
AND HIS
QUEEN
He was always there to take my hand...
even if it was to lead me straight to hell.
USA Today& Wall Street Journal Bestselling Author
AMO JONES

War and His Queen

Carpe Noctem

Amo Jones

Villainous Pen Publishing

War and His Queen
By Amo Jones
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Author Note!PLEASE READ

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Love was nothing more than a mask used to forgive someone for all the wrongs they did. Love didn't exist. Obsession did.

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Fuck love.

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My drink of choice was betrayal.

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Priest and His Anarchist
Also by Amo Jones
Backmatter
Triggers

The Elite Kings Club left a trail of fear behind every person who whispered their names throughout the centuries that they'd existed. They were the product of every nightmare you were told as a child, only now, they don't go bump in the night. They race modified cars, throw parties to conceal their morbid games, and leave behind the kind of chaos that can never be tamed. They were from an ancient bloodline of the three Founding Fathers, and it was almost time for them to plunge deeper into the depths of hell. Now that they were all on their motherland, and even closer to an island with history as dark as it was ruthless, no one had a say in the carnage of what was to come. And in this case, with War and Halen. Until now, they were nothing but exactly as they appeared on the outside.

He was a brother's best friend, and a boy Halen had never not known.

She was the daughter of one of the most feared families known to man, and the only girl who ever kindled his rage. They'd push and pull until it tore them apart…if only to feel the shell of their bodies close.

Halen knew crossing that line with him was dangerous ground, yet she yielded her weapon and did it anyway. But history was being challenged, and the Kings were about to learn that not all enemies are discovered on a battlefield.

Some are the ghosts of what was left behind.

If you don't want to read the triggers, please still read the author note below.
*This book **will not** be the darkest book in the *Carpe Noctem* series. Compared to upcoming books in the series, I would consider this slightly above middle ground.

To read the trigger list please click here

Note:
Before going into this book please understand that these characters do not hold back.
This book is for the messy folk. The ones who love the toxicity of a violently bonded couple. They're sadistic in their mind games and do everything in their power to break the other, but if anyone else dares, they'll fuck them up. This is an "I can destroy you as much as I want but if anyone else even so much as breathes at you wrong, I'll rip their fucking lungs out and hang them as an ornament on my wall" type book. From both sides…
In saying that (haha…) this is a book of fiction. No, I am not these things, do what they do, believe in the same things they do, nor do these characters represent who I am as a woman or a human. They can be (at times) a terrifying figment of my imagination. Using my artistic flair for chaos, I allow them to control every step of the way when executing their stories.
I do not advise anyone to partake in any of the activities you find inside (please don't. I don't look good in orange). This book is recommended for people over the age of 18. Please heed the triggers and this note carefully. I have warned you. If you're new to dark romance and are not familiar with the content that may lay ahead, you can continue, of course, but know that this series will not be a kind first date. It will tear through your virtue and leave you there to bleed out.
I mean, War and Halen won't be a terrible first date, but if you're starting from Priest and his Anarchist, or Stella and her Outlaws, I would back up and start with *War and His Queen*.

If you're still reading and yelling at me to shut the fuck up already so you can get to the good shit….

Leave your morals here and flip the page…

To my readers. Yes, the men I write do want to fuck you just like that…

Halen

Our parents would tell stories about the days when they were in high school in the Hamptons instead of Riverside. I can't think of anything worse than going to school in the fucking Hamptons. Nothing against the place, but having to exist with the mundane who know nothing of the world I was born into sounds like a fucking liability.

I draw in a deep breath. I've been waiting thirty fucking minutes. Only they would make me wait at all—and for what? It better be a good reason. I am tired as hell. Me and the girls sat up all night last night planning what we were going to do. How it was going to be done and what kind of carnage we could create with the time that we have left before the ritual.

Digging through my handbag, something pinches my thumb and I suck it between my lips as the clovers from my bracelet shine against the sun. "These assholes better hurry up."

Elaborate patterns line the gold archway to the front door of Hayes Castle. I wish I was joking. Our home is an excessive portrayal of modern-day regency, presenting a deceptive image of perfection and gold.

Leaning against the entryway table next to the bifurcated staircase, I hear cars pulling up outside. Doors open and close, and then heavy footsteps pound against the marble porch. Finally, both doors part open, and there, standing in front of me, is my twin brother.

"Don't fucking look at me like that, Halen. This is the first time we're not all waiting on you."

"First of all…" I take a step toward him, before he widens the door further, revealing War and Vaden out on the driveway. "Wait, why are you all here and not already there?"

War lifts his arm to rest on the door of my car, flashing me a wide smirk. Aside from being painfully annoying all my life, he has made it his mission for as long as I can remember to make everything difficult for me. He also has a perverse way of getting off on my demise.

"Get in the car, Halen."

With a raised brow, my mouth snaps closed. "Uhm, I wasn't talking to you."

His tongue glides over his lower lip. "Oh, you weren't? Hmmm… let me see where I can find the fucks I can give you. Maybe they're beneath my nine-inch cock. Get in the car."

"Shut the fuck up. Both of you." Priest—aka said twin brother—turns his back to me and I watch as he makes his way back down to his ride. He opens the front door, and I trace the lines of his flared guards. Priest's S15 is the best you'd ever see. Dumped almost on its ass and rolling with deep black rims. We all have different cars, but they all stick with the same theme. Even our Euros do.

Black. Even the number plates that we don't have to display.

"Pap is away, you know!" I call out, flipping Priest off behind his back and shoulder barging past War on my way down.

"Wanna try that again?" War calls out from behind his GTR. The fact that he *stole* the R32 body that I wanted to build when we were fourteen, and worked it to push over eight hundred horse, meant that not only did I need to import the R34 from Japan, but I threw in a Hakosuka for shits and gigs. Vaden then made a mad dash for the S14, before War was an absolute asshole and took a damn RX4. War's 32 is pretty, though. Gloss black with a wide body kit and bronze deep-dish rims. And that's not even mentioning what's under the hood. We're just one massive family with a Godzilla complex. Which only meant River grabbed the Honda NSX and Stella the RX7 Batty. Priest has a collection too long to detail.

I can almost feel the daggers Vaden is shooting at War. "We're laughing until we're not and Priest shoots you between the eyes."

"My aim is better!" I call out, sliding into my 34. I push the start button and breathe out a sigh as she purrs beneath me like a well-groomed beast.

There's a knock on my window. I flutter my lashes up at my twin and crank it down. Our similarities end with our hair color. Where my eyes are green like Mom's, his are honey hazel and rimmed black. How he stands at six-six and me five-four I

will never know. The math is not mathing.

"Yes, brother?"

"Don't look at me like that." He flicks my forehead with his finger. "You ain't racing at Devil's Cockpit." My smile falls. "I mean it, Halen. You're not. I need you to hang back with the girls for tonight."

"What!" I snap. "Do I look like a babysitter to you?" It doesn't help that I'm the oldest girl, even if not by much. The others don't need a damn babysitter. Except for maybe Stella.

"You look like you'll be whatever I want you to be." He leans down, tossing a mask onto the passenger seat. "It's Friday the thirteenth."

"I don't want—" He stalks off once again. My window closes as I open my Spotify playlist. I need backup.

I tap my best friend's number, checking my lipstick in the rearview mirror before directing my car out of the circular driveway. Riverside is a smaller town, with a population of 13,534. The population is important, because anytime it drops, we make sure it's from natural causes. If anyone steps into our town and inflicts harm, they answer to our Fathers, and soon… to us.

"I'm ready, but hear me out…"

I slump against my chair, narrowing my eyes even though I know she can't see me. No one relied on me to take care of others, but I liked to anyway. It's like I was birthed with a natural flair to protect my family, so I'd never complain, but if they thought I was *babysitting,* then maybe they wouldn't find out about what we really do.

Sometimes, and I mean mostly every day, we needed a fucking break. To be away from the glamour and gold, and just… exist. Do whatever the fuck we want without our brothers looking down on us like pesky house cats that hadn't been fed in two hours.

"I don't want to hear you out, Evie!" Evelyn Paige has been in my life since we were two years old. Mother said we reminded her of her and her best friend Tate. I wasn't so sure if that was true. I love Aunty Tay, but the bitch is as crazy as Mom. I swear, we all watch as they enable each other through bad decisions. Now it's shopping, holidays, and petty revenge. I can't imagine what they would have been like as teenagers.

Evie is not that. Not even close.

"You better be ready!" I tap the indicator to turn down her street. It's a little after ten, so it's quiet when I pull my car up to the curb outside her house, the RB engine rumbling beneath my butt.

I open a new text to her, tucking my long chocolate brown hair behind my ear. When she doesn't answer, I peer up at her house.

All homes in Riverside are somewhere on the scale of *big money energy,* and Evie's dad's pockets were one of the steepest in our town. Her parents owned a billion-dollar umbrella company and decided to raise their only daughter here. To be given the right to buy in Riverside, you have to get council approval, and that council is the Elite Kings. So, her family either has history tied to one of the ten Founding Families, or they came in by jumping into Dad's. Considering his Forbes ranking, I'd say it could be a combination of both.

The light on their patio switches on and a glimmer of chestnut hair glows under the light. Evelyn Paige was anything but basic. She always went all out with her outfits, even when we'd be chilling.

She leisurely descends the wide porch wearing a beige matching set that includes a short skirt, a little crop top, knee-high beige boots that have a relaxed fit around her legs, and a long trench coat. She has her hair in a tight, low bun and is wearing white-rimmed sunglasses that cover her amber eyes.

The passenger door opens, and she slides in, moving the discarded mask onto the floor.

"You look hot, bitch, but are those my shoes?" She leans over the center to scan my outfit. Tassel-ripped, high-waisted, wide-bottom jeans with knee tears over the thighs, paired with Air 1s. I kept the top simple with a tied white crop top that tucks beneath my boobs.

"No." I hesitate, sliding into first gear. Shit. They could be. Since we all share a similar style, in a way that none of us are consistent, I don't know who leaves what in my room.

"I have your Dolce shoes, anyway." She shrugs, tapping the mirror down to check her lipstick. "Figure you won't need them since you have them in every other color, and besides—" I glare at her from over my arm. And besides what? "—you know pink isn't your color."

She has a point. "True."

"What's the plan tonight?"

I tap my finger against the steering wheel, looking between the road and the LED dash that illuminates the time.

"Hales…" Her voice breaks through my thoughts and she shifts in her seat to face me. "I know that fucking look. What are you thinking?"

"The Kings are doing their usual tonight and being bossy with it." I'm not sure if I'm thinking at all, since I'm pretty sure if I get caught doing what I'm about to suggest we do, that it will end in one or two ways. The first? Priest will lock me in my room like fucking Rapunzel and won't let me out for weeks, or… War. War's wrath isn't something I particularly want to

witness.

I pump the brakes when we reach a red light, my eyes flicking between the two signs in front of us. One points to the Riverside town center, and the other to the highway that leads straight to Chevalier Hill.

"I mean…" Evie teases as she removes her sunglasses. Her eyes glisten with mischief as she looks between me and the sign, rubbing her hands down her brown thighs. "This would absolutely piss your brother off."

"He's not the one I'm trying to piss off." I squeeze the steering wheel.

Evie pauses, raising a perfectly laminated brow. She knows who I'm referring to. "What did he do now?"

I push the clutch and drive it into first. They'll be spilling through these streets any minute now and when they do, I don't want to be here.

I punch in the clutch and tap the accelerator with my other foot. Just as I hit a high RPM, I release the clutch and slam that same foot down on the brakes until my back tires lose traction and smoke veils the windows of the car. Evie and I both breathe in the familiar smell of hot asphalt and burnt rubber as if it's our signature perfume.

Dropping it into second, I release the brakes and floor us forward. I'd never go to Chevalier Hill, but it would be fun to see how far we can actually go until someone, or something, stops us.

First stop: pick up the girls.

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Love was nothing more than a mask used to forgive someone for all the wrongs they did. Love didn't exist. Obsession did.

My fingers touched the top of the water as my eyes closed. Birds chirped around the crashing waterfall as I dug my toes deeper into the sand. I'd waited for this moment. The elated minutes that passed when I knew I shouldn't be here.

I opened my eyes and looked over my shoulder. Where the hell did River go? Our towels were sprawled out over the sand as the sound of Metallica played through the air. I loved it here.

Water continued to swallow my body as I moved deeper and deeper out. As soon as the bite of cold evaporated, I dipped beneath the water, holding my nose. My skin no longer prickled like a furnace as I pushed up from the sandy ground, surfacing back to the top. I swiped my eyes clean as ink bled down my hands from my mascara, and I spun around to face the shoreline once again, hoping to find River, only to collide with a hard body. My hand flew and landed against his chest. I knew who it was. Even without his telling tattoos, I'd know. The vehemence that followed him everywhere was trailed by a tongue of flames that always seemed to taste me anytime he was near. One of these days he was going to swallow me whole.

Stop, Halen. Think. Not that. Not now.

"War…" I shoved myself away from him, but his hand snapped around my back, forcing me close. As if he knew that I didn't want him to be near, but more I needed him to. In darkness, even the violent burn of hatred could lead you home. "What the fuck are you doing?" I managed to writhe my way around in his arms, and just when I thought he was going to let me swim to the shoreline, his hand was on my belly, pressing me back again.

His fingers sprawled out over my skin. "Stop fucking talking." I bit down on my bottom lip as my breath caught in my throat. I didn't fucking want to stop talking. I wanted to be angry at him for touching me. I wanted to let that fire burn until it turned us both to ash.

He brushed his lips against the side of my neck and fear pebbled over my flesh. Fear, anger, hatred—they were all cooked with the same ingredients used to fuel the one emotion that was abused as much as it was chased. "You want this. Stop fucking playing." His fingertips skimmed the line of my bikini and my thighs clenched together. "I don't know why. All I'd do is break you open and tear out every single thing that makes you *good*."

I pushed away from him and this time instead of him holding me in place, he let go. I swam through the water, annoyed with myself for not fighting hard enough. Why did I let that happen?

Fuck War.

And fuck the casualties that he always seems to take down with him.

"You good?" Stella peered at me over her Prada glasses, holding two red Solo cups in each hand. Her midnight black hair was braided into two fancy fishtails on either side of her head. "What'd he do?"

"Nothing." I swiped one of the cups from her. If there was one thing that I was good at doing, that was ignoring War.

Well… no, that was only a half-truth.

Passing the people drinking near the swing that swoops out to the water, I followed the trail through the clearing, stepping over broken twigs and flowers. Devil's Cockpit starts from the bed of water on the other side near the skid pad, but you can also cut through this track to get to the private sandy cove.

I hadn't quite reached the end when I felt the invisible touch of eyes from behind. Maybe it was the silence because of the separation between where I stood and where I had to go, or maybe it was the way the wind curled around my ankles and that familiar weight of dread filled my stomach.

My fingers prickled as I spun around, only to be met with nothing. Nothing but the empty pathway that I just walked. Before I could overthink, I continued through the track. That same weight fell to the ground when a shadow stepped out from behind a tree.

He was tall and lanky, and had a red-and-white spiral earring hooked from his lobe.

His head tilted to the side and my mouth watered.

He was way too old to be here.

"You lost?" My feet carried me to where he stood, as the wind tossed around the loose strands of my hair.

I tucked a lock behind my ear. "I'm Halen, I—" I paused. *Oh no.*

He didn't answer.

I sidestepped away from him, but my arm brushed his in passing. Blinding pain gripped around my throat as I fell to my knees. I couldn't breathe. The world began to crumble around me.

The track.

The sand.

The laughter and sounds of shredding tires.

Everything dissolved around me as he grabbed me by my throat and hauled me to my feet. The world as I knew it was no longer.

The world as I knew it was bleak.

War

14 years old

My bedroom door crashes open as Halen slips inside, resting her back against it when it closes. I stopped wondering what the fuck game she was playing at a long time ago. She was Halen Hayes. The girl got away with everything.

Literally.

"Halen." Priest stands from my bed, spilling weed all over the carpet. Not that Dad or Mom cared much. Pretty sure Mom ate brownies on the daily. "What the fuck are you doing here?"

Even with J. Cole and Joyner Lucas beating through the walls, it does nothing to distract Priest.

"Ah… like I'm not coming if you guys are throwing a party!" She flicks her long brown hair over her shoulder, narrowing her eyes on all of us. She settles on me, because she always fucking does.

My eyes fall to the cup she's holding in her hand. "You drunk?"

"Hmmm?" She straightens her shoulders a little too tightly, as if trying to appear sober. "No. Unfortunately."

Vaden watches her closely, his eyes darkening. "She's off her face."

"Aw, Vade…" She drops her bottom lip. "We could bet your R35 that I'm not."

Priest points at his twin with a rolled J between his fingers. "Go downstairs. Now. I'm taking you home."

"You can't. You're drunk." I push up from my bed, holding her stare. "I'll take her." We'd been avoiding each other since her thirteenth birthday. Pretty sure she made an extra effort to stay away from me after that.

Priest tucks the joint behind his ear, closing the distance between the two of them. He lowers himself to her eye level, which is more than a whole foot shorter. "You were supposed to be at home."

She challenges him. "I was. And then I decided that I wanted to get drunk. Lucky for me, you guys make that easy."

"I'll drop her on the way to Emma's." The party is small right now because the night is young. It's barely nine p.m. and she is clearly already off her shit. In a couple hours, the house will be filled with drunk fuckboys, and well… Dad said no blood on the carpet.

I wait for him to answer, careful around the subject of Halen. Priest didn't give much of a shit about anything, but when it came to his sister, he folded. Not always, because she liked to use his patience as a fucking jump rope. He leaves her alone but make no mistake, he's always watching her. They were called the Shadow Twins growing up. She was daylight, he was darkness, and everywhere she went, he would be there. Priest was her veil, and if anyone tried lifting that shit, he'd slit your fucking throat and wear your organs as jewelry.

Priest ignores her, keeping his eyes fixed on mine. "Lock her in her room when you get there."

"Errr—I'm right here!" she snaps, taking another step closer to Priest. I grab her by the arm, opening the door with my other and hauling her ass down the hallway.

"War!" she growls, hitting my hand away, which only makes me squeeze harder. I don't release her until we're down the stairs, out the front door, and I'm throwing her into the passenger seat of my RX4.

"You really gonna handle that?" Vaden asks from the shadows on the patio as I slam her door closed. He flicks his cigarette onto the concrete. "Or do we need to go over how we don't shit where we eat?" He raises a single dark brow at me, taking a careful step out of the shadows. The glow of the garden lights details his face, flaunting one blue eye and one brown. "Or how we all took an oath between us that we wouldn't fuck around with each other."

I flip him off, reaching for the door handle on the driver's side. "You don't have to tell me shit." That oath was bullshit. We all knew it. It was made for *me* by *me.* They all simply agreed.

Priest knew why I did it. He was too smart not to.

I swing the door closed and pump the clutch. The rotary engine pulses beneath me like a song I could play on repeat, but Halen reaches for the radio anyway. Tension snaps between us, but she wouldn't be able to stay quiet for long. It isn't until

we're down the long driveway that she turns the music off and shifts her body around to face me. I knew she was going to say some dumb shit, but I wasn't expecting…

"I need you to fuck me."

I slam on the brakes and she flies forward, one hand on the dash. "What the fuck, Halen?"

Her emerald eyes widen on me as her fingers rake through her hair to pile it on top of her head. "It's a simple request, War." She shrugs, her long hair now tied in a high pony. "Please? I need to—" She pauses a moment, her eyes drifting off in the distance before her head shakes and she's back on me. "—scrub my V-card and I'd rather not fuck any peasants from school."

My mouth opens and then closes. I've never been speechless, but of course it was her who was the first to do it.

"Stop fucking talking." I turn back to the road, shifting into first gear. I'm about to release the clutch when her fingers wrap around my chin and she's forcing my attention back onto her. Halen and I have always been a no go. Brotherhood oath aside, I'd never do it. It's why I put the fucking thing in place to begin with. I didn't do it for anyone else but myself. Then there's Priest. And Bishop fucking Hayes as her daddy. Yeah, you've got a better chance of getting laid in a fucking nunnery than me *ever* hitting that.

"War, I'm serious." My eyes drop to her lips. They're on the puffy side. Always looking like she's been kissed way too fucking much. They suit her diamond-cut face. Thick lashes surround emerald green eyes, and her cheekbones are high and sharp—until she smiles. She'd always been cute. If cute meant she could also break your nose with her right hook. *True fucking story.* But tonight was the first night I recognized just how much her features had changed. Somewhere between the little girl I'd known all my life and this woman she was growing into, was whoever this person was looking back at me, asking me to fuck her.

Fuck.

I would be lying to myself if I said she wasn't hot. But that didn't take away the fact that she was a Hayes.

Fuck. That.

Her lashes fan out over her cheeks as she searches my eyes. I don't even care that I've stopped in the middle of the road and that there is a chance we could be spotted since everyone knew who owned our cars in this town, even our exotic rides.

"Halo…"

I don't even get to finish my sentence before she's sliding over the center, gripping me from the back of my neck and lowering herself onto my lap.

My hand comes to her throat out of instinct, but instead of it helping my situation, all it does is show the tattoos on my hand against her virgin fucking skin.

She blushes, and just when I think she's going to panic and tell me to let her go, the corner of her mouth curves up and her teeth catch her bottom lip. "Okay, then let's play."

"Fuck me…" I growl, my patience waning. If this is all it's going to take for me to question everything, then shit. I need to distract myself. Distance. I need more distance.

"I'm trying!" She rolls her eyes. I catch her hips when she thrusts against me, shoving her back into her chair.

Her head hits the window. "Ow!"

"Stay the fuck there. I mean it."

"Fine!" She whacks down the mirror, fixing her lipstick. "But don't say I didn't come to you first."

Now

That was almost six years ago and as much as neither her nor I have ever spoken about it again, I kind of want to every time she's around, just to torment her. Have we stayed away from each other since? Yeah. It was easy enough to do, until we were all together. Which is almost every fucking day. I don't think any of us have gone longer than a week from being apart.

So we did what we had to. People in Riverside wouldn't so much as breathe near any of those girls without us knowing about it. It's hard to try and get with a girl whose family is part of the most feared criminal organization known to man. Organization is probably putting it lightly. It's a order. A way of life. Generation through generation, we have controlled all sectors of power in the world. Dubbed the modern-day illuminati from conspiracists throughout the years. They're almost right. Only they're not.

It's kept the weak away from the girls. If you're not up to stepping up against us, then you don't deserve to have them on their knees. It's a win-win.

"Yo!" I whistle out to Vaden as he slides into his jacked-up R35. I toss the *Scream* mask at him and he catches it in midair as I open the driver's door to my R32. I gutted the fucking thing from the ground up, dumped it on its ass, and dressed it up with deep-dish rims. Currently, it's pushing eight hundred horse, which is nothing if you compare it to Vaden's new Hennessey Venom, but it's still the fastest JDM we have and I didn't pay a couple mill for it.

The mask hangs off Vaden's finger. "The fuck? What's with the cheesy cliché? The only mask that touches this face is my million-dollar Calvaria."

"Put the fucking thing on." Priest opens the door to his 180SX. He pauses, looking down at my Jason mask. "Time to play

with the children.”

Halen

I rev the engine loudly outside the Vitiosis manor, after Evie and I went home quickly to switch out cars. The Hakosuka is *the* favorite child. Painted ivory with blacked-out badges, she's the perfect ride or die. Early on, we had to change the engine because older GTRs didn't come with the RB. But now, she's a weapon.

When she takes too long, I slide my ass up onto the car door through the window. The Vitiosis manor offers direct mountain views due to its secluded location. It incorporates modern-day gothic architecture, featuring glass windows, sleek black paneling, and Marquina marble stoneware. Our parents started developing Elite Boulevard, which now extends across the entire land behind Riverside, during their pregnancies.

Down Elite Boulevard, is Hayes, Vitiosis, and Malum Lane. The first house you come across is Hayes Castle, situated between Malum and Vitiosis. Brantley and Saint, Stella and Vaden's parents, decided to build theirs at a safe distance from civilization. All of the Kings have been building their own houses for years now, and last I checked, Priest's was almost ready. We hadn't seen any of them because each house is hidden from view, branching off from our parents' land.

Naturally.

The chandelier hanging from the ceiling casts a flickering light over the patio. Their laughter fills the air as they stumble out the door, their tangled locks a chaotic mix of blonde and raven. Stella has her midnight hair in a ponytail, braided down her back, while River's sandy waves have been ironed flat.

River chose a sleek strapless minidress in black with side slits and thigh-high strapped heels, while Stella opted for a glossy, form-fitting black strapless minidress and coordinating thigh-high boots.

"I said not to make me wait!" I raise a brow at my other two sisters, before sliding back into the car and winding my window up.

While Stella piles in and slams the door closed, River leans forward, her arm brushing against mine. "First of all," her hair falls to one side, "you and I both know that we had to all wait for the pack of demons to go play with their toys."

"I feel like they're getting worse with age." Evie tosses the bag of coke to River. Since Stella is a couple years younger than us, we mostly try to keep her away from trouble. But she's eighteen, and as much as we've tried to shelter her from a lot of shit growing up, she's a King. She's going to want to play…

…and she does.

Evie turns to me. "Well, where to? New York? Please! I wonder if I can find that one—"

Suppressing a laugh, I steer us around the circular driveway that takes us down the mountain and back onto Elite Boulevard. "Have you not been on Snapchat?"

Evie shakes her head slowly as Stella leans forward and turns the music up. "Fight the Feeling" by Rod Wave plays through the subwoofers. "No!" she yells, just as her phone lights up. I watch as the two little lines that appear between her brows slowly disappear and the corner of her mouth twitches. "Oh, perfect."

I turn the music down a smidge. "Yup." My eyes meet the girls in the back. "I've been thinking. We could start something similar to Devil's Cockpit, but without them being annoying." I pause, thinking over my next words. Whatever they do on Perdita is in a whole different genre of playtime. Perdita is our mother island, and is a short three-hour flight off the coast of Riverside. The island itself is occupied by our own people, and civilians who are connected to the ten Founding Families who prefer to live in a lawless society. It's run by a bitch I hate, and weaponized by a bunch of boys who have been bred on the island for hundreds of years. The Lost Boys. Only they aren't boys. They're as calm as Red Riding Hood, but as hungry as the wolf.

Stella peeks up from the back after scrolling through the private Snapchat. "You started something in Bayonet Falls? That place is abandoned, isn't it? Since the war between *they who shall not be named* and us." I choke on my laugh at Stella's poor attempt of trying to not bring up the Gentlemen.

"Yeah, but that's why it's a perfect place to have them."

"By them, you mean races? Actually, a good idea. It's between Riverside and Chevalier Hill, so it's not fucking with the treaty, and—"

She raises her index finger, flashing her ten-carat radiant diamond ring. Our fathers ice us out with every birthday, drowning us in diamonds. I'm sure there's a hidden meaning behind why, and I'm certain it has to do with intimidation.

"—most importantly, we can do whatever the fuck we want." The sweet smoke of zaza fills the air as Stella hands it to Evie. "You know they think we're all virgins."

My teeth catch my lip to stop my smile. "Only because we allow them to."

I guide us through the forested landscape of Vitiosis Drive. Riverside may have over thirteen thousand residents, but everyone, including people who don't live here, know who we are.

Us girls came up with a loophole when we were young to keep the boys from finding out about anything we do. We would drive into the city and hit parties there. It was a four-hour drive there and four-hour drive home, but we usually left on a Friday and came home on a Saturday.

Playing with lies was easy, since we were all in it for each other. Deep down, I knew none of us wanted to be caught, yet it granted us freedom. Freedom to be around people that didn't know us, our parents, or our families. At least not personally, and if they did figure us out, it was easy to say that rumors were just that—rumors.

Of course, we don't kill people.

No, my pop wasn't the president of the United States of America for two whole terms while also helping run a secret order.

No, we don't gather and drink each other's blood during a ritual to take over when it's our time.

The Elite Kings were notoriously known amongst circles that we wanted to stay *away* from. We wanted normalcy. To snort coke off each other's tits and make out with random guys. That would never happen in Riverside, or anywhere north toward New York. So, we went in the opposite direction, hovering around smaller city folks who are too busy and uptight that they don't care about what's going on around them. The straight-laced kind.

Evie didn't need to be with us since she wasn't a King, but she knew enough without knowing too much. She was the popular girl at school. Everyone wanted to be her friend because that's how Evie made you feel. Wanted. Cherished and loved. She was the humanity to our family, and I think her father was that to Dad too.

River's flash to her phone is popping off in the back, before she directs it toward me and Evie. I flip my middle finger up, and Evie sticks her tongue out to the side.

Lost in a fit of laughter, I turn back to the road and hit the volume up.

The moment we pass the farewell sign as we leave Riverside, I drop it into third and floor it. The deeper you drive on this highway, the clearer it is how very little people come down it. It would have been years since cars drove this road, since the only place it leads to is an abandoned town, and the one town that we have a treaty to never set foot in. The simplistic straight road with bumps of hills and nothing surrounding us but woodlands on either side.

I'm laughing at River and Stella lip-synching "Low Life" for whatever TikTok trend is happening right now, when something runs out in front of my car. My skin prickles and I scream, slamming on the brakes so fast the tires skid to a halt.

Evie hits the radio off as seconds pass in silence, and I turn, checking them briefly. "You're all okay?"

Stella has her hand over her chest. "Yes, but what the fuck was that?" It didn't help that there are no streetlights or road lights, so all that we could see was directly ahead of us through the headlights.

"I don't know…" I whisper, leaning back in my chair. "I'll check."

I move to open the door, but Evie's hand comes to my arm to stop me. "Be for fucking real right now. This is how everyone dies in *every* movie."

"This isn't a movie. It's Riverside. Which means it's worse." I open my door and my Jordans hit the pavement. I walk around the front of my car, where headlights beam toward the endless road of darkness. Someone is curved to the side, clutching his stomach. "Shit." I drop beside him, squeezing his arm to roll him onto his back.

Wearing nothing but a pair of ripped jeans and boots, there's a deep gash over his ribs where blood weeps from. He's clearly unconscious. I pause when I notice the *Scream* mask.

"Jesus… did we hit him?" Evie asks, her eyes wide on his body.

I scan the front of my car. "If we did, he would have done damage. Old cars like this wouldn't take to it very well. No. I think he ran out for help." I push up, pointing to his body. "Stay here with him. I need to call my dad." I run back to my car and lean in through the door.

River clears her throat from the back seat, flicking her nails. "You and I both know what this is."

"I know. But Evie is here, and I don't want to have to have that conversation with her. Ever."

"I think it's about time." Stella sighs, resting her head on the window. "You kept our world from her long enough, and she knows the Elite Kings Club exists and that our families are crooked. This is just a *hey, yeah, so on top of that, we also*—"

"—Halen! He's moving!"

"Well, at least he's not dead," River mumbles. I know they're right. I know that beneath it all, I've kept Evie away from the drama of our world, not because I didn't trust her, but because I didn't want to put her in danger. Maybe doing that was placing her in the direct line of it. Priest has been on my ass for years about telling her everything so we don't have to tiptoe around her. She is with me eighty percent of the time. It makes things difficult.

A loud howl vibrates through the trees in the forest on either side of the road as I make my way back to them. Evie jumps, turning from left to right. "What the fuck was that?"

"A werewolf?" I joke, leaning back down to the guy on the road. Abs ripple over his torso, his skin naked of tattoos. I tear off my jacket, ignoring the cold bite that leaves teeth marks over my skin, and rest it against the wound on his ribs. He groans beneath the mask, so I slowly peel it off.

Jesus. Please don't know this guy. Please tell me these idiots haven't finally taken their shit too far and they've actually killed someone on land. Though he is moving…

"Hey…" I slap the guy's face, around his high cheekbones and larger set lips. There's a bump in his nose from being hit one too many times, and a dusting of a beard over his jaw.

His eyes peel open, resting on me. "Damn…"

I raise a brow. "Okay, playa. Where'd you come from?"

He coughs, keeping his hand on his tanned stomach as he tries to lift himself off the road.

"Hey! Stay there." I force him back down with a shove.

He clears his throat. "I—I must be lost."

I bring his face back to mine by his chin. "I'm Halen. Halen Hayes."

His face pales. "I'm lost." Clearly. What the fuck is going on?

I peer up at Evie, who cocks her head to the side, looking between me and the guy. There have been two times in my life where Evie has found herself in a position to ask questions. She always chooses not to. I'll wait for the day when she finally does, and then I'll allow her to decide what she wants to do. I can handle that later. Right now, I need to find my fucking brother.

"I'm going to need you to get up. Are you hurt anywhere else besides your ribs?"

"No. I don't think so."

I place my hand under his head. "Ev? Help?"

"Ah…" She shuffles on her shoes, looking back to the car. "This a good idea? Halen, we don't know him, and I get that you're this big dog and your families are all untouchable, for whatever reason, but they're not here right now and he could be a killer!"

The guy chokes on his laugh. "That's fucking rich."

"Okay, buddy. Shut the fuck up and get up." I jerk him forcefully, and he finally lets me move him off the road, shuffling onto his feet. I wrap his arm over my shoulder and direct him to the passenger side of the car. "Ev, get in the back with the girls."

"Halen…"

"Evie!" I widen my eyes at her, opening the passenger door with the hand I'm not holding the bleeding stranger with.

"Fine." She moves past us both, jumping into the back seat. I lean down and move the passenger chair back farther, dumping the boy down and leaving his mask on his lap. I shut his door and round the front of the car, pausing when I reach my side. Laughter and more howls tear through the forest, and for a moment, I think I see shadows move behind the trees.

I roll my eyes, sliding into the driver's seat and turning the key over. "Sadists."

"What's going on?" Evie leans forward, and with her literally breathing down my neck, I know there's no way out.

"This was our brothers."

"Yeah, I know they do that weird—whatever—thing it's called every Friday night."

That's about as far as her knowledge will go, the same as everyone else who attends. The poor idiot bleeding out in my passenger seat included.

"But isn't it just, like, a hunting game or something?"

"Or something…" River snickers.

The more time passes, the more we are all on edge about the ritual. I know the boys are more involved in the world than we are right now, but that wasn't by choice. I tried to fight for more position, but it didn't work. Mom broke the way for girls, or as we used to be rudely named, Swans, but the way paved is clearly only for the men of the EKC.

Am I mad? Not really. Our time will come, but in the meantime, their hobbies have become reckless. It's only a matter of time before it lands in the Fathers' hands, or they become a worldwide issue.

The guy beside me shuffles around to face me, his body sliding down the seat.

"If you get blood on my custom Recaro seats, oh lost one, I might have to finish what my dear brother started."

"Oh this?" He gestures down to his side, lifting my jacket from his wound. "Wasn't Priest."

"Of course, it wasn't." I bat my lashes down at him. "My brother doesn't let the evidence run free." I turn back to the road,

rolling my eyes when I see the Welcome to Riverside sign. This was a game. The high of a chase. They all love the chase, but this one has War all over it.

Just as we pass the sign, I hook a sharp right and drive us down the familiar road. Void of lights and asphalt, we jolt in our seats through the bumps. It's nothing but a narrow dirt road in the middle of a forest.

"Fuck. Can you slow it?" The guy beside me groans, shuffling further up his seat, and I press the accelerator more, smirking.

He blanches. "Or not."

It feels like the road goes on forever, until we reach the clearance and see the wide field. The water rushes fiercely down the mountain and into the renowned water hole below, the natural pool surrounded by large trees. A bonfire rages nearby in the darkness, where cars are parked and lined around the edge, marking the start of Devil's Cockpit track.

People spill out around the space, drinking and laughing amongst each other, but I ignore them all and drive directly forward, breaking up a circle of jocks.

When they see my car, none of them complain.

"I can't believe you're bringing me here. What a setup…"

"Hey." I leave the engine idling and remove my belt. "No one told you to jump out in front of my car and ruin our night." I reach for my phone and open Snapchat, sending out a message in the group chat that was for the meetup in Bayonet Falls.

"For help—" He glares at me, but the corner of his mouth curves in a smirk. "I did it for help." I hate to admit it, but he's a little cute. If the whole wounded puppy thing did it for me.

Or maybe it could. Since War decided to have his little toy land directly on my lap, why not wind that bitch up and let it dance?

"Ew. I can't believe our weekend is ruined," River complains, tapping on the passenger seat. "Hurry up, asshole. Get out so we can leave."

"You know, you guys are all quite charming. Anyone ever tell you that?" He reaches for the door, and my eye twitches when I realize he'll leave blood there.

"Yes," I answer sweetly. "My daddy does every night when he tucks me into bed."

He laughs but stumbles out. I shove my side open and follow behind him, rounding the front of the car. Devil's Cockpit is the Riverside meetup, where everyone who attends Riverside Elite University and Riverside Prep comes every weekend.

This is the starting point, which then carries on through the back of Riverside against the cliffs that drop out to the ocean, before looping around once you hit the fence line of Elite Kings Estate and coming back to Devil's Cockpit. This isn't your average track. It's rough. If you're not skilled enough, you die. Point blank.

It's more their little game that they participate in behind the guise of the races and partying that no one knows about. It's all a decoy for what's really going on deep in the forest. I don't know much about it since we never spent time around here. In fact, we made it our mission to be as far away from Riverside as possible when we could, much less during weekends.

Until their subject jumped out in front of my car.

"Halen!" Connor, one of the varsity players who attends Riverside Elite, nudges his head up at me, while lifting his red Solo cup. I smile but it doesn't reach my eyes. He's only ever bold enough to say hello to me when he's drunk. Bunch of fucking idiots. All of them. All too afraid of the Kings to actually talk to any of us.

I can't say I blame them.

My headlights beam onto where chopped logs are splayed out behind the fire. War, Priest, and Vaden are all sitting there with an array of girls around—or on—them.

Priest empties his drink and shoves the girl off his lap. Stumbling, she lets out a yelp before hitting the ground.

"How embarrassing," Evie mutters below her breath. "I'm getting a drink."

"Don't even fucking start." I glare at my brother as he gets closer.

People separate farther away from us, stumbling and dancing amongst each other. The music is loud enough that people can't hear our conversation, but me and Priest fighting is nothing anyone hasn't seen before. I love my brother. Even when we're fighting. Even more so when we're fighting because at least he's showing *something*. I have to keep him here, in his humanity. Even if that involves rage.

"Why did you bring him back here?"

"Where the fuck else was I supposed to take him?"

"Fuck." Priest grabs the guy by his arm, forcing him over to where War and Vaden are.

I turn slowly to face the girls, annoyed. Evie's hiding her laugh behind her hand.

"Are you laughing?"

Her hand slips. "Yes?"

"We should have just left him," River complains, following Priest. Stella looks between the both of us, coming up to my side and hooking her arm in mine.

"I didn't dress for this kind of vibe."

"I'll postpone Bayonet Falls." I widen my eyes at her, and we all follow Priest. My phone's vibrating in my pocket but I know that if I take it out now, the questions will start. When I say I can't breathe without one of them knowing how many breaths I've taken a day, I mean it. It's almost like when you have strict parents, but all it does is make kids disobey—kind of like that. Except we've been smart about it for years and they don't know anything.

Fire crackles through the air, its flames stretching out into the vacant night, as the Milky Way dusts the sky in a decoration of stars and the full moon.

Priest shoves the guy down onto the ground. "Shut the fuck up and you might actually live to see your teammates." He looks towards War, but I resist the urge to follow his gaze.

War is a ho. All of them are, with the exception of Vaden. Priest is selective with who he sleeps with, in a sense that he usually just hovers around one or two girls and bounces between them both, but War has a collection. Tillie told me he got it from Nate, and you know what? I can totally picture that.

"Why is Emma on War's lap like she fucking belongs there?" Evie whispers into my ear.

I don't care enough, nor do I want to give him the satisfaction of me seeing it. Over the years, we've all been good girls around the families. We've acted as we should in public and kept our messiness behind doors. While the rest of them freely engage in promiscuity and drugs, acting like they own everything.

I've hated it.

River has hated it.

Stella doesn't really care about it.

And if Dad ever finds out the kind of bullshit that they've been doing behind these parties and races, I'm pretty sure he's going to lose it.

Priest is nothing like our dad and a little more like our pop. Mom said it's what scares Dad the most about him completely taking the gavel.

But I think they're both wrong. I think he's more like the first Hayes that founded the EKC. That's not what should be worrying them yet. They should be more worried that all three of them are like unhinged hyenas, and since they don't have to play with the big dogs yet, they're killing time by risking exposure on our own streets, all for shits and giggles.

"Priest?" I glare at my brother through the waves of heat. "Leave him alone."

War chokes on his laugh, and much to my annoyance, my eyes shift to him just as he's moving Emma around to straddle his lap. His tatted hands land on her ass cheeks as he leans forward and drags his tongue from the side of her neck, and across her jaw, all while keeping his eyes locked on mine. My stomach explodes into a ball of fire and all the anger that I've kept hidden threatens to surface. Years. Years of us all acting like placid little Kings that sit in the shadows of these assholes. He's never done this, though. The small number of times that we've been here, War hasn't paraded his conquests around in front of me. I don't know if that was on purpose, or whether this one is for—whatever reason—but now I kind of want to punch him.

Straight in the face. It wouldn't be my first time.

Pop Smoke starts playing loudly and I move from the spot I'm at to where the wounded boy is, lowering myself down to kneel in front of him. "Let me have a look?"

His brown eyes come to mine. It's the first time that I've realized he's probably a little older than us. If I do my calculations right, that is not good. "You got anything to numb the pain?"

My focus drops to his lips and my mouth twitches. I reach into the back pocket of my jeans.

Step one, boys. We do drugs. Just like you do.

I flash the ball in front of me and he shuffles up to rest his back against the log, one leg stretching out and the other bent. He rests his other arm on his knee, caging me in between his legs. I can feel the heat of the flames against my back. It does enough to keep me warm, since he ruined my jacket.

"Halen? Back the fuck up." War's icy tone sends shivers down my spine. *Oh? You did see me here?* Bet you fucking do now.

I turn slightly, hiding my smile from behind my shoulder. "How about no?"

Priest empties the rest of his drink in the fire, coming directly for me. He leans down to snatch the bag from my fingers, but I close it in my palm.

"Priest, I'm the same fucking age as you. Fuck you and go sit down."

He glares down at me. "I'm taking you home."

"No. You're not. Because I'm not fourteen anymore—none of us are—and since we've spent the better half of our lives partying in towns away from Riverside just to make you lot comfortable, I'm telling you right now—" I pause, hating that I'm sitting so low and he's towering over me. He's tall enough as it is without me being in this position, but I kind of like the way I'm resting against the wounded puppy. I'm almost sure he's allowing me to do it. *Who is he and why does he have balls bigger than every other boy in this town?*

"What?" he snarls, turning over his shoulder slightly until he finds River and Stella. I know I've got him, because there are rules, and as ruthless as the Kings are, we follow our rules. One of them just so happens to be keeping our family drama out of

the public eye. All it takes is the right person to see a crack in our perfectly constructed castle and they'll slither in and try to demolish the foundation.

Priest glares down at me. "We will talk about this later." He turns back to where he came from, not another word said. It's not like they're completely stupid. They've seen us drunk and act a fool. Before me and the girls decided to dance our way around them, we were always their problem. Getting drunk at their parties, dancing around their friends, but soon enough it was as annoying for us as it was for them because they'd just end up ruining our night.

I turn back to the puppy, finding him already tracing the lines of my jaw and face. Why is it the longer I look at him, the hotter he gets? It doesn't help that he's exactly my type. I happen to fall for the pretty damaged ones.

Whether that damage is self-inflicted or not.

"What do you say?" I wiggle the bag in front of his face, catching movement in my periphery. Both River and Stella drop to the log he's leaning on. Goosebumps shiver down my spine.

I'm cold. I need another jacket.

I pop open the little bag, keeping my eyes on his as I tap the powder onto the crease where my thumb and finger connects. Bringing it up to his nose, he holds my stare as he leans down and takes the hit, clearing his nostril on his way back.

"Stella…" Vaden growls from somewhere behind me.

Stella finishes taking her hair out of her braid, winking at me and flicking it over her shoulder as her eyes sway up to her brother. They both have heterochromia, only flipped opposite.

With a wide smile, she snatches the bag off me.

The guy grabs my wrist and I watch as his tongue laps up the residue on my hand, keeping his eyes on mine. My breathing hitches and I lean down, catching his chin with my fingers and moving slightly to the side so War can see the movement.

Hovering my lips over his, I whisper, "Kiss me."

I accentuate the 'me' on purpose. I'm sure War doesn't remember shit about that night years ago, but just in case he does, and because I'm feeling petty as hell, I climb on his lap.

His hand lands on the back of my ass as he pulls me into him. His lips are on mine in an instant and my mouth parts for him enough for me to be able to smirk.

He moves his hand from my ass to his stomach and I feel him twitch against my lips. I rest my hand over his, lifting it from his wound. It's not as bad as I thought. More a deep graze.

I arch a brow at him. "A little dramatic, don't you think?"

"Halen." The agitation in War's tone isn't missed. By anyone, I'm sure, which makes no sense since he has always made it very clear—all two times—that in no way ever do I affect him the way he does me.

I roll my eyes, glaring at him from over my shoulder. "What?"

"Get off the fucking ground."

"He's cute, though…" I bat my lashes between War and Priest. I leave Vaden out of it because for the most part, he isn't as bad as the other two. Vaden somewhat allows Stella to do what she wants. He just makes sure to keep a close eye on her. Why I couldn't get him as a brother, I will never know. "Can I keep him?" If they want to see me as a problem, I'll be a fucking problem.

Orange hues from the fire cast shadows over War's jaw. A very clenched jaw.

With his lip curled in a snarl, my stomach coils like hot wire when his eyes darken on mine.

What the fuck is his problem?

He flips the hoodie of his jersey over his head to shade his scowl.

I still remember the day Dad sat down with me and told me about boys. Well, he tried. And I loved him for it because his message was a lot different than Mom's. Where she was the stricter parent, Dad was chill. He was good. He told me to stay away from boys until I was twenty-five because if Priest turned out to be a flop, I'd get to take the gavel. Obviously, my brother didn't turn into a flop. If anything, he will yield the gavel the same way Pop did. I was only eight or nine at the time, so the thought of boys was a major ick, but as time went on… War changed. I can't remember ever not having a crush on him. Would I ever tell him? Hell no. Did I get drunk one night and try to fuck him? Yes. Thankfully, he kept that to himself. Most likely to protect their little brotherhood.

I try not to think about when exactly War turned from being a friend, someone I could always rely on, to this. Probably around the time I asked him to fuck me.

"Jesus…" Evie hands me a drink over my shoulder. "You really just left the kiddie pool and dove headfirst into the adult section."

I take the Solo cup from her, pushing up from the wounded puppy's chest while bringing the rim to my lips.

"I did." I stay near the girls. "Because I'm over it and I know Dad will be on my side when it comes to this—Mom too. They just don't know how bad it has been, and also, if he continues to make it an issue, I'll let our parents know about his little game that they play on the weekends." I take a sip of the alcohol, letting the cheap vodka slide down my throat. "Maybe give an insight as to why some people go missing."

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Exploring the Variety of Random Documents with Different Content

Silloin puhkesi Magda hysteeriseen kamalaan nauruun. Hento vartalo vavahteli sen purskahduksista. Kyyneleet alkoivat taas vuotaa silmistä virtana. Harhama kauhistui. Hän luuli hulluuden puuskan sittenkin kohdanneen Magdaa.

— "Magda… Rakas, hyvä Magda!" — hätäili hän taas.

Nauru jatkui ja kiihtyi. Onneton tyttö kiemurteli sen käsissä. Harhama hätäytyi kokonaan. Mielenmaltti hävisi. Hän alkoi huutaa apua. Hänen äänensä kaiku kierteli kamalana aaveena tyhjässä asunnossa. Nauru yltyi yhä rajummaksi. Joskus nousi niin voimakkaita naurukohtauksia, että vartalo puristui kokoon, kuin kiekoksi kutistuva mato. Silmissä paloi outo ilme, ja äänessä luuli Harhama selvästi tuntevansa mielipuolisuuden kamalan väreen.

— "Hah-hah-hah… Hah-hah-haa", — nauroi onneton tyttö puristaen yhä rajummin rintaansa. Harhama juoksi edestakaisin huoneessa, tapaillen yhtä ja toista esinettä.

— "Hah-haaa!" — kuului väliin iloinen, kamala naurunparahdus naurun lomissa. Sen kaiku kuului viereisistä tyhjistä huoneista pöyristyttävänä ulvahduksena: Hah-haa! Haa!

— "Herra Jumala!" — hätäili Harhama tuskissaan. Hämähäkin viisaat silmät laajenivat hänen silmissään pyöreiksi keriksi. Oli, kuin niiltä juoksisivat ennustuksien rihmat, kutoutuen valmiiksi verkoksi. Viikkokausia kestänyt hermojännitys oli kehkeytynyt äärimäiseksi hermoarkuudeksi. Hänen hätänsä hehkui hiiloksena.

— "Nyt se tulee se kuolema. Se ennustus ruumisliinoista toteutuu", — tuskaili Harhama itseksensä.

— "Hah-haa! Haa!" — kirkaisi taas Magda painaen kouristavaa sydänalaansa ja kyyneleet valuivat edelleenkin virtana. Harhama kuvitteli hämähäkkiä kohtalon pedoksi, jonka silmät pyörivät suurina ja kynnet vetäytyvät ulos, valmiiksi iskuun.

— "Magda… Hyvä, rakas Magda…", — vaikeroi hän taas.

— "Hah-hah-hah-haa!" — kirkasi onneton nainen vastaukseksi, kokoon puristuen. Sitten alkoivat naurunpuuskat heiketä. Harhama kuivasi hänen likomärät, turvonneet poskensa, hokien:

— "Magda hyvä… rauhotu… rauhotu! Minä tulen vihille ja kaikki menee ohi… tulee taas hyvin." — Hän hyväili ja suuteli hänen käsiänsä, puheli häistä ja kyseli vieraista, tajuamatta itsekään, mitä kyseli ja saamatta vastausta, tai sitä edes odottamatta.

Viimein taukosi nauru ja muuttui nikahduksiksi. Sitten hiljenivät nekin. Harhama pyyhki kyyneleet Magdan silmistä, rauhotellen häntä, kuin lasta. Hän kehotteli lähtemään kotia valmistumaan vihillemenoa varten. Rauhottaessaan hän hoki lakkaamatta:

— "Magda… hyvä Magda!… rauhotu…"

— "Oh, miten raskas on joskus elämä… Sen onnikin on katkeraa sappea!" — huokasi Magda nousten raukeasti.

Ja kun Harhama auttoi häntä turkkia päällensä pukiessa, lausui hän väsyneellä äänellä ja nikahduksen katkaisemana:

— "Tule vähän ennen kello — kuutta… Kuuden aikaan on ilmotettu vihkimisen alkavan."

Hän lähti.

Mutta nyt vaipui Harhama samaan nojatuoliin, missä morsiamensa oli äsken kärsinyt. Hän oli alussa aivan tylsistynyt. Mutta kohta nousi hän taas uhmaten kohtalonsa valkohevosten selkään ja päätti antaa lopun mennä menojansa pitkin vaahtoista ulappaa. Hän rohkaistui taas siitä ajatuksesta, riemastui ja nautti siitä… Ajatukset alkoivat hieman virkeämpinä nousta siivillensä. Nopeina kiertelivät ne kaikki äskeisten tapauksien sokkelot ja iskeytyivät sitten sen ainaisen puikon päähän, jonka ympärillä hänen elämänsä kieppui. Suuri elämänkysymys kohosi taas hänen eteensä kylmänä luurankona.

Ja silloin sotkeutui hän mietteisiinsä:

— "Mitä varten olen nyt taas kaikkea päättänyt… ja taas purkanut… ja päättänyt?… Ja mitä varten olen luvannut mennä vihille… ja miksi kaikki tämä elämänilve ja -iva?" — mutisi hän katkerasti.

Ja kun hän sitä kaikkea mietti, ilmestyi hänen sielunsa eteen ilkamoiva elämä *elämänivana*. Hän istui sen edessä, sormet sen hampaiden välissä. Se puri ja jäyti hänen olemustansa.

— "Minä istun nyt sormet elämänivan suussa", — mutisi hän.

Ja kun hän vielä hetken sitä ajatteli, kiehahti hänessä viha sitä Jumalaa vastaan, jota murskaamaan hän oli ikänsä varustautunut. Hän kihisi hampaittensa välistä.

— "Kuka on sinut, elämäniva, minun eteeni lähettänyt… minulle ilkkumaan?… Hänkö, se hirviö, jota ihmiset palvelevat?… Häpeä, että on moinen Jumala mielikuvituksessakaan!"

Ynseänä, välinpitämättömänä lopetti hän:

— "Keitos tästä tulee! Mutta tulkoon nyt, mikä tulkoon!"

Mutta öiset valvonnat ja pitkäaikainen kiihtymys olivat väsyttäneet hänet kokonaan. Hän nukahti hetkeksi puoli-uneen. Hän näki unta takanansa, verkossansa riippuvasta hämähäkistä. Se katseli häntä viisailla silmillänsä ja alkoi kasvaa hirvittäväksi kohtalon pedoksi, joka valmistautui kaappaamaan hänet viikatemaisiin kynsiinsä… Hämähäkin silmät suurenivat. Ne pyörivät päässä, kuin myllynkivet… Nyt on se jo valmis hyppäämään… Nyt vetää se kynsiänsä esille… Harhama kauhistuu. Lopuksi tuntee hän hämähäkin heittävän hänen päällensä kostean, ilkeän verkkonsa. Väristys juoksee hänen ruumiinsa läpi luita myöten… Ovikello soi samassa hätäisesti, kiivaasti. Harhama kavahtaa kauhistuneena ylös luullen kellon soittoa hämähäkin huudoksi. Hän on hikimärkä, kuin liinaliko.

Samassa syöksyy sisään merimiehen morsian, joka on lähettänyt Magdalle väärän sähkösanoman ja antanut kaikelle uuden käänteen. Hätäisenä, itku kurkussa kertoo hän sulhasestaan ja itsestänsä, sulhasensa pienestä palkasta ja kuinka hän oli päättänyt palvella ja ansaita lisää… Mutta jos Harhama tahtoo vaatia hänelle rangaistusta, menettää hän paikkansa…

— "Mutta jota minä en tietysti tahdo", — rauhotteli Harhama tyttöä, naurahtaen, ja lisäsi:

— "Mutta te olette erehdyksellänne pakottanut minut viettämään häät… Saatte rangaistukseksi tulla häihini vieraiksi."

Tyttö lähti. Harhama alkoi pukeutua. Palvelustyttö, joka oli odottanut siksi päiväksi häitä ja joutunut ymmälle, tuli sisälle ja kysyi:

— "Koska herra Harhama tahtoo päivällistä?"

— "Ei koskaan", — oli nyreä vastaus.

Tyttö hämmästyi. Hämillänsä kysyi hän:

— "Minne herra Harhama sitten lähtee?"

— "Vihille."

— "Herra isä… vihille!… Eikä ole morsiussänkyäkään vielä… minnekä minä…"

— "Mene hiiteen morsiussänkyinesi!" — keskeytti Harhama äkäisesti tiuskaisten. Sana morsiussänky inhotti häntä, kuin likaisella vaatteella lyönti.

Tyttö loukkautui ja hämmästyi. Hän kuuli Harhaman ensi kertaa puhuvan hänelle raa'asti. Nyreänä mennä hynttyytti hän ruokailuhuoneeseen, ryhtyi pyyhkimään tomua ja hoki loukkautuneena:

— "Tiuskuvat vielä… Saat päivät juosta ja hompsuttaa… ja siivota ja… Koko talo on jo nurin… Kyllä on elämä!… Morsiusvuode… morsiusvuode!… Hoh-hoi!… Hoh-hoi!… Koko *elämä on kaunis morsiusvuode, jossa on lika luteena*… Syö ja ryvettää koko ihmisen… ja likaa… Hoh-hoi, hoh-hoi!"

Kello löi kolme. Harhama pukeutui ja lähti ulos, mieli kylmänä sytenä, hartioilla kohtalon kylmä hämähäkinverkko.

* * * * *

Harhaman lähdettyä, ryöpähti Perkele ulos Hämähäkistä, istahti tuolinkarmille ja lausui ilkkuen:

— "Hah, hah, haa… No tästä tulee juttu! Sikiöitä ei siitä avioliitosta tosin synny, eikä miehestä tule kotoisen hameen palvelijaa… mutta… niin: tulevathan miehelle sen kautta tästä illasta lähtien kaikki naiset kielletynpuun hedelmiksi… No! Se riittääkin toistaiseksi… Pääasia on että vihkimisen kautta saadaan muut hedelmät semmoisiksi, että mies niitä syötyään pelkää sitä vanhaa koronkiskuria, kuin Adam… Hah, hah, hah! Nyt se saituri saa toisenkin kerran huhuilla paratiisissa… Harhama ei tule ensi huudolla viikunalehtien alta… Nyt vaan miehelle semmoinen hedelmä, että… ai-jai… Lelu lapselle, että viihtyisi sen kanssa paremmin, kuin Jehovan ohdakemaalla…"

Tämän sanottuaan hävisi Perkele, hulmahtaen näkymättömäksi.

* * * * *

On pureva pakkasilta. Päivänsappi on sammunut. Iltaruskon railo himmenee jo taivaanrannalla, mutta yhä kävelee Harhama tuuli oppaana. Kuunsirppi alkaa jo kiivetä taivaan kuperalle laelle, mutta ei kiirehdi hän vielä kirkkoon morsianta alttarille viemään. Hän kulkee suitset kädessä. Etäältä kuuluu kohtalon hevosenkello. Hän miettii… miettii sotkuisia vyyhtejä… Ei löydy hepoa… Hakamaa on suuri ja vauhkot ovat kohtalon valkeat hevoset…

Jo syttyvät yönvalot taivaan korkealla kuperalla. Nyt palaa jo taivas täydessä tähdessä, mutta yhä viipyy sulhanen. Pakkanen yltyy. Se pureksii kuun säteitä vihaisena, nipistelee kulkijoiden ihoa ja rätisee rakennuksien nurkissa.

Kirkontornissa lyö kello jo kuusi. Lyönnit irtaantuvat kellon kylmästä kuparista yksitellen, väristen vilusta, ja pakenevat öiseen ilmaan, kuin kauhun iskemät petolinnut, joita kiukkuinen pakkanen pureksii.

Mutta sisällä, upeasti koristetussa kirkossa istuu hääväki. Se on siellä istunut jo kauvan, odotellen sulhasen tuloa, mutta sulhasta ei kuulu. Häävieraiden hartioita painaa raskas hiljaisuus. Kaikki ovat neuvottomina. Morsiustytöt seisovat ujoina. Heidän povissansa väreilee häätunnelma, silmänluomi kohoaa joskus ja sen alta vilkaisee arka silmä sulhaspoikien joukkoon. Kaikki näkyvät oudostuneena kysyvän: Miksi ei sulhanen tule? Enkeli katselee alttarimaalauksesta huolen painamaa hääväkeä ja siellä täällä kuuluu levoton huokaus.

— "Miksi ei sulhanen jo tule?" — sopertavat morsiustytöt kainoina.

Mutta kukaan ei vastaa…

Kun kello löi tornissa puoli-seitsemän, saapui odotettu sulhanen vihdoinkin. Hääväen hartioilta nousi paino pois, haihtui kuin aamuhämärä. Morsiustyttöjen silmänluomen alta katsoi arka silmä rohkeampana. He katselivat ihastuneina morsianta, heidän toivojensa ja unelmiensa ihaninta päämäärää. Puhdas, jalo naisen tunne puhkeaa heidän povissansa ja nousee punehtuvalle poskelle ja arkaan silmään, kuin väri kukan armaalle terälehdelle.

Mutta morsian on kalpea, kuin liina iltahämyssä. Hänen käsivartensa vapisee sulhasen kainalossa, kun tämä vie hänet alttarin eteen. Säälien katselee häntä alttaritaulun enkeli… Mutta sitten nousee heleä puna taas morsiamen poskille. Hän unohtaa kaikki; hän on nyt ainoastaan morsian… morsian, ihmisonnen kukka.

— "Sormus!" — kuiskaa hän sulhaselle.

Sormus! Nyt vasta muisti Harhama, että hän oli sen lahjottanut mustalaistytölle. Hänen aivoihinsa iski taas ajatus kääntyä vielä pois, sillä olihan tämä taas kuin kohtalon viittaus ja sen valmistama. Ja hän kääntyi jo. Mutta silloin kohtasi hänen katseensa tutun, nuoren, herttaisen tytön, Tamara Ivanowna Kasanskajan, jota hän oli kutsunut pikku Tamaraksensa, hemmotellut ja laulatellut. Se oli kutsumaton vieras. Harhama hieman hämmästyi.

— "Ah, sormus on poissa!" — mutisi Harhama itseksensä.

Mutta Tamara oli jokaisella hermollansa seurannut hänen liikkeitänsä ja käsittänyt asian. Nopeasti, kenenkään sitä huomaamatta, pisti hän sormuksen Harhaman käteen ja painautui toisten taakse. Hetken kuluttua sitoi tämä Magdan itseensä vieraalla sormuksella.

Jo alkavat urut soida. Alttarin eteen polvistuu pari, jota erottaa toisistaan ylipääsemätön kuilu. Harhaman käteen tuodaan häitä varten sepitetty ranskalainen häälaulu, jota urut soittavat. Hän tarkastelee sen runojalkoja, laskee sen sointuja. Alttarienkeli katselee säälien näitä mullanlapsia, jotka sidottavat Herran edessä kohtalonsa toisiinsa. Vanha pastori puhuu jo alttarilla Jumalan nimessä, lämmöllä ja vakaumuksella. Hän on valinnut puheensa aineeksi sanat: "Se huone ei pysy, jonka Herrana ei ole Jumala." Harhama seuraa puhetta aluksi, mutta pian johtuvat hänen ajatuksensa niistä munkki Pietarin sanoihin, niistä ennustuksiin ja Noidan lauluun…

Pastori lopettaa puheensa ja alkaa lukea vihkimislukuja. Harhamasta tuntuvat vanhan pastorin puheet ruumissaarnoilta, joilla

hän julisti hänen ja Magdan välillä avatuksi sen juovan, joka erottaa elävän kuolleesta, juovan, jonka yli ei ole lupa astua. Hänestä tuntui, että pastori antaessansa siunauksensa, julistikin Magdan hänen suhteensa Jumalan morsiameksi, ja kun hän luki ne sanat, joilla Jumalan nimessä antoi hänelle oikeuden Magdaan, hän heittikin maanmullan hänen haudallensa ja sanoi sulhaselle: Älä koske häneen, sillä hän on Herran oma, eikä sinua varten tehty!

— "Amen!" — lopetti vanha pastori.

— Amen! — hymyili surullisena enkeli.

— Amen! Amen! Amen! — kertoili kaiku kirkon korkeissa holveissa.

* * * * *

Ja nyt oli Magda hänen vaimonsa yhteiskunnan ja kirkon lain edessä. Ja nyt, kun kaikki oli ohi, alkoi hän tuntea inhoa koko tapahtumaa vastaan. Kun sitten alkoivat sukulaisten onnentoivotukset, kun hänenkin olisi tavan mukaan pitänyt suudella morsianta, vaimonaan, karttoi hän sitä päättävästi. Morsiustytöt seisovat taas kysyvinä, häävieraat odottavat äänettöminä ja alttaritaulun enkeli katselee säälien tomun lapsia, joiden otsalle laskevat väliin huolet, väliin haihtuvat ilot. Tornista kuuluu kellon lyönti. Väki alkaa poistua, puvut kohisevat ja siellä täällä sekaantuu niiden kohinaan raskas huokaus.

Mutta kotona odottivat kalpeaa morsianta kukkaset ja soitto ja laulu. Hän oli rikkaan isän silmäterä, eikä isä ollut mitään säästänyt, tehdäkseen tyttärensä viimeisen illan isän kotona valoisaksi… Viulut soivat, kukkaset tuoksuvat ja morsiustytöt katselevat kademielin morsianta.

Ja morsiamenkin otsalta on huoli hävinnyt. Hän on onnellinen. Hän on enemmänkin: hän on morsian. Soittajat virittävät jo viulujaan. Maljat täytetään helmeilevällä samppanjalla… Ne kohotetaan ylös ja huudetaan:

— "Onnea!"

— "Onnea, onnea!" — sopertavat morsiustytöt niiaten.

Maljat juodaan tyhjiksi… Ne täytetään uudestaan ja taas tyhjennetään.

— "Onnea! Onnea!" — kuuluu yhtenä sorinana. Samppanja helmeilee; kukat tuoksuvat ja laulut helskyvät… Kaikkialta näkyy iloa ja onnea.

Ilta kuluu, yö lähenee. Viulut alkavat soida. Morsiustytöt nojaavat jo hellinä tanssittajiensa rintoihin. He uneksivat jo lemmestä, morsiamesta ja häistä.

Yö kuluu syvemmälle. Viulujen kielistä vuotavat sävelet yhä armaampina. Tytöt nojaavat tanssiessaan yhä hellempinä sulhaspoikien rintoihin… Povi tuntee jo poven sykinnän.

— "Onnea! Onnea!" — hoetaan kaikkialla.

Viulunkieli soi yhä kovemmin. Neidon povi lämpenee. Jo tuntee neito oudon tunteen. Hän arkailee jo. Silmänluomi laskee aran silmän yli, kun hän viulunkielen soidessa nojaa tanssijansa rintaan.

— "Nyt ovat häät!" — kuiskaa neito punastuen.

Nyt ovat iloiset häät! — soi viulunkieli.

Nyt ovat kauniit häät, — hymyilee talon vanha huonetonttu, seinänvierillä lymyävä, lempeä hämärä. Vallattomat varjot kisailevat tanssivien parien välissä kuiskien: häät! häät!

* * * * *

Mutta silloin iski salama häähuoneeseen.

Äkkiä taukosi soitto ja helähti laulu. Morsiustytöt lauloivat Noidan laulua. Harhama säpsähti. Hän leimusi taas tulena. Kaikki tapahtumat ennustuksineen tuprahtivat häneen savuna. Morsiusneidot näyttivät hänestä kalmanneidoilta. Ne muistuttivat laulullansa, että se hetki lähenee, jolloin tulet häähuoneessa täytyy sammuttaa ja kaikki paljastaa hämärissä, kun morsian riisuu huntunsa ja vuode on valmis… Hän päätti aikanansa lopettaa kaiken, kun sen kumminkin *täytyi* tapahtua. Hän pyysi saada puhutella morsiantansa. Tämä vei hänet iloisena huoneeseensa, heittäytyi nojatuoliin huoletonna, kuin lintu varvulle ja odotti, kysyen naurussasuin:

— "No, mitä nyt?"

— "Magda!" — alkoi Harhama puhua. — "Lupaatko kuulla minua tyynenä ja olla levollinen koko illan?"

— "No, tietysti! Onko se taas jotain hyvin vakavaa?" — vastasi Magda hilpeästi, naurahtaen. Harhama jatkoi:

— "Niin, Magda! Minä toivon, että sinä olet niin jalo ja voimakas, että jaksat alistua välttämättömyyden alle… Kun minä menen ulos, voit sanoa minun olevan täällä sisällä, se ei herätä huomiota."

— "Minne ulos?" — keskeytti Magda hämmästyneenä. Häähuoneesta kuului Noidan laulu. Harhama jatkoi:

— "Niin… ulos… Magda-rukka! Meitä yhdistää nyt kirkon ja yhteiskunnan laki, vaan ei se side, joka yksin tekee miehen ja naisen puolisoiksi ja jota ei voida katkaista, jos ei tahdo olla — anna anteeksi — portto. Onnettomuuden välttäminen ei siis ole vielä mahdoton ja myöhäinen, sillä tulet eivät ole vielä sammuneet… Sinä katsot minuun kummastuneena… Minä sanon lyhyesti: Sinun mieheksesi minä en voi tulla ja siksi kiitän minä sinua kaikesta, toivotan sinulle onnea ja sanon jäähyväiseni."

Harhaman puhetta kuullessa oli Magdan ruumis alkanut värähdellä, posket vavahtivat, suuriin silmiin nousivat kirkkaat kyyneleet ja hoikka vartalo kutistui kauhusta nojatuolin pohjaan, kuin pelästynyt mato. Sitten yltyivät vavahdukset nopeammiksi, koko vartalo tärisi ja kädet vapisivat, kuin lepattava liina.

— "Ku-ku-iinka?" — parkasi hän ojentaen vartalonsa, kuin mato ja tavottaen vapisevilla käsivarsillansa siepata kiini sulhastansa, kun tämä kumarsi ja poistui… Ovi sulkeutui hänen jälkeensä. Häähuoneessa lauloivat morsiustytöt Noidan laulun sanoja:

"Kun vielä häissäsi viulut soivat, jo lähtee sulhosi toisen luo."

Viulunkielet soivat vielä. Hänen häähuoneensa tulet olivat jääneet sammuttamatta… Huomenna kokosi morsian häävuoteensa liinat säilyttääksensä ne kalmanliinoiksi…

Ennustusten keränpohjallinen alkoi näkyä… Ohjattomina karkasivat kohtalon raisut ratsut.

* * * * *

Mutta porttikäytävän edustalla odotteli pikku Tamara kylmässä kuutamokylvyssä. Harhaman ohi astuessa syöksähti hän hänen eteensä.

— "Tamara!… Miksi täällä?" — huudahti Harhama hämmästyneenä.

— "Kävelkää mukanani!… Pikkusen vaan!" — keskeytti Tamara terävästi.

He kävelivät jonkun matkaa ääneti. Kun he olivat tulleet erääseen kuutamoiseen puistonreunaan pysähtyi Tamara ja kysyi:

— "Harhama! Muistatko — minä sanon taas sinuksi — muistatko, kuinka sinä soitattelit minulla talvi-illat sonetteja?"

Harhama vaikeni.

— "Muistatko, kuinka laulelin sinulle romansseja?" — jatkoi Tamara.

— "Mitä tarkotat, Tamara?" — kysyi Harhama tylsänä.

— "Vastaa, äläkä kysy! Muistatko, kuinka laittelit runoja melodioihini ja säestit laulujani?"

Harhama katsoi äänetönnä kysyjän silmiin. Tyttö jatkoi:

— "Ne olivat kauniita aikoja. Eikö totta, Harhama? Sinä puhuit 'pikku Tamaralle'… silittelit sen tukkaa. Sinä leikit Tamara-rukan kanssa…"

— "Ei, Tamara", — yritti Harhama.

— "Ei… ei. Sinä leikit kanssani kuin kissa hiiren kanssa", — keskeytti Tamara jyrkästi ja jatkoi:

— "Muistatko, kuinka uittelit pikku Tamaraa käsivarsillasi Terijoen ja Systerbeckin rannoilla?… Muistatko kolmivaljakkosi, kukkasi, makeisesi?… Älä keskeytä!… Ne olivat kulta-aikoja. Onni hymyili joka nurkassa ja joka akkunalla kukka. Minä lauloin. Me uimme sävelissä… sinä uitit minua runoudessa… suurissa aatteissa… Sinä kylvetit minua hengelläsi… Se muu ei olisi vielä ollut mitään, mutta sinä noiduit minut juuri *hengelläsi…"*

— "No, no…"

— "Älä keskeytä… älä keskeytä!" — tiuskasi kiivastunut tyttö, jatkaen: "Sinä puhuit minulle niin suuresta ja jalosta ja kauniista, semmoisesta, joka oli ylempänä minun käsitystäni, ja kiedoit minut sillä… nostit itsesi minun sielussani yli-ihmiseksi… Ah, sinulla on lahjat, jotka sinä salaat muilta, kuin varkailta helmet…"

— "Herra Jumala, Tamara!…"

— "Kuule loppuun! Minulle sinä raotit henkeäsi… ja tietysti rouva Vronskajalle… Muilta sinä kätkeydyit… No, se on ehkä laskelmaa sinulta, sekin… Sitten kun olit minut kietonut, hävisit sinä ja kihlasit Magdan. Minähän olen *köyhempi*… Mutta katso, enkö minä ole *kaunis*?"

Ja tyttö katsoi hurmaavilla silmillänsä Harhaman silmiin terävästi, kuin käärme. Harhaman kasvonlihakset vavahtivat ja katse kääntyi maahan. Tamara puhui hampaittensa välistä:

— "Sinä et uskalla katsoa silmiini… sinä *kavala*… Pistikö se sana sinua, koska vavahdit?… Hyvä! Minä annan sinulle anteeksi, ensiksi: koska rakastan sinua ja toiseksi: koska olen sinulle *kostanut*. Sillä tiedä: *Minä olen sitonut sinut Magdaan*…"

Syntyi äänettömyys. Harhama ei tiennyt mitä sanoa. Jokainen tähti näytti katsovan häneen pistävänä, kuin puukon terä. Tamara alkoi taas puhua silmät salamoina:

— "Mitenkäkö olen kostanut? Minä tiesin kaikki sinun ja Magdan väliset onnettomat asiat, sillä Magdan ystävä on myös *minun* ystäväni. Minä tulin kirkkoon, kun sinua vihittiin… Minä tulin kutsumatta ja huolimatta vartijoista. Oliko sinulla jotain pelättävää, koska kirkkoa vartioittiin?… Oliko rouva Bjelskaja ehkä?… No niin! En tiedä miksi sinne tulin… Ei minulla ollut koston aikomus mielessä… Mutta kun huomasin sinun katselevan tyhjiä sormiasi, käsitin minä, että sinä, koska ei ollut sormusta, vielä peräydyt, kuin sallimuksen käskystä, ja…"

Tamara imeytyi katseellaan Harhaman silmiin ja alensi äänensä ilkkuvaksi, puoli kuiskaukseksi:

— "Ja silloin minä päätin sinulle kostaa… sitoa sinut Magdaan, jota olet himonnut…"

Hiki kihosi Harhaman otsalle. Tamara jatkoi:

— "Sinun onnettomuutesi on siinä, että sinä olet *lahjakas*, olet henkisesti ylempänä muita ja Magda ei uletu sinun nilkkaasikaan. Hän on sinun hengellesi taakka… kiviriippa kotkan kaulassa… Ja minä päätin, etten päästä sinua peräytymään haluamastasi ansasta… siitä henkesi kiviriipasta. Siksi minä riennätin sinulle sormuksen…"

Tamara vaikeni ja katsoi voitonilolla Harhamaa silmiin. Tämä tuijotti synkkänä, epäselvänä eteensä. Tähdet pistelivät häntä taivaanlaelta kirpelevällä valolla. Kaikki tiet nousivat hänen eteensä jääpuikkoina. Herttainen tyttö, jota hän oli lellitellyt, kuin lasta, mutta jonka nuoruudesta hän oli samalla nauttinut, kuin kukan tuoksusta, katsoi häneen nyt, kuin vihainen käärme. Vaiti-olo jatkui. Pakkanen pureksi ihoa. Harhama oli jo tylsä, kuin puupala. Lopuksi kysyi Tamara jyrkästi:

— "Lupaatko säilyttää sen sormuksen, jolla olet Magdaan sidottu muistona minulta?"

— "Kyllä… kyllä!"

— "Hyvä! Pidä sanasi! Nyt kerron sen sormuksen historian: Isäni isällä oli palvelija, joka petti kihlatun morsiamensa. Petetty morsian kirosi silloin kihlasormuksen ja lähetti sen sulhaselle takaisin. Mutta sulhanen vihitti sillä itsensä toiseen ja — kirous teki tehonsa: Molemmat tulivat onnettomiksi. Sen jälkeen on sormuksella vihitty isäni palvelija ja — kirous on seurannut häntäkin… Kotonani on sitä siksi säilytetty, kuin taikakalua. En tiedä miten se sattui mukaani kirkkoon. Katso, se on halpa vaskisormus…"

Ja alentaen taas äänensä aivan kuiskaukseksi, ivalliseksi, kysyi Tamara Harhamaan tutkivasti tuijottaen:

— "Harhama! Sano, enkö ole osannut kostaa?"

Syntyi pitkä — pitkä äänettömyys. Pieni vesikarpalo kierähti Tamaran kylmälle poskelle. Hän kuivasi sen kuin ohimennen, puristi Harhaman kättä nopeasti ja lausui:

— "Kun nyt voisin kostaa sinulle vielä *hyvällä*, niin olisin tyydytetty… Sillä minä rakastan sinua."

Ja hän hävisi pakkas-öiseen kuutamoroihuun, kuin surullinen sävel autiolle järvenselälle…

* * * * *

Mutta rauhallisena kylvi kuu kylmiä säteitänsä valkealle hangelle. Ne kimaltelivat sillä pakkasen puremina, kuin hopeataululla kipinät. Taivaan kuperalla kannella paloivat tähdet ja kaukaiset maailmat kirkkaina yönvaloina. Mutta Harhama ei tuntenut pakkasta, eikä huomannut valoja taivaanlaella. Hän tunsi olevansa jäisen erämaan asukas. Tuuli oli noussut ja vienyt pois hänen majansa. Hän seisoi nyt yksin jäisellä aavikolla, jolla ei näkynyt polkua, eikä tien viittaa.

— "Jumalan rauha, veli!" — kuului silloin lempeä ääni hänen takanaan. Hän katsahti taaksensa ja näki munkki Pietarin seisovan siellä.

— "Jumalan rauha!" — huudahti Harhama vaistomaisesti ihastuneena.

Munkki Pietarin kasvoilla näkyi sunnuntaipäivän herranrauha, niinkuin paimenen kasvoilla, kun tämä on sunnuntaina johdattanut karjansa ruohoiselle aholle ja itse istahtanut sammalelle marjaisen mättään vierelle, katsellen kuinka kylläinen karja laskee levolle ahon rehevään ruohokkoon, kirkonkellon kumahtaessa metsän takaa. Hän palasi työväen kokouksesta. Ne kokoukset olivat Venäjän kansan elämän uutuuksia. Vasta äsken oli saatu erityinen ilmotus, että ne ovat sallitulta. Ne olivat erämaan kosteikkoja, joihin aavan Venäjän lapset nyt kokoontuivat vaivaloisen erämaan matkan jälkeen

virkistämään itseänsä sillä lähdevedellä, joka niistä pulppusi, ja munkki Pietari oli ensimmäisiä, joka vaatimattomana ja huomiota herättämättä palveli niihin kosteikkoihin saapuvia väsyneitä erämaan lapsia. Hän palveli siellä Jumalaa ihmisessä, kuten hän kerran oli Harhamalle sanonut, lisäten: "Meidän ihmisten ei pidä lähteä etsimään Jumalaa taivasten taivaasta, sillä Hän on käden ylettyvillä. Hän odottaa meitä köyhissä ja langenneissa." Hän sanoi näistä kokouksista palaavansa aina mieli rauhallisena. Hän palveli Jumalaansa ajamalla työväen ja köyhien asiaa.

Mutta kun Nikitin uskoi voivansa köyhyyden hävittää yhteiskuntajärjestyksen muutoksella, uskoi munkki Pietari parannuksen tulevan ainoastaan mielenmuutoksesta, jonka vaikuttaa Jumala. Hän kehotti rikkaita tekemään oikeutta köyhille ja köyhiä hän kehotti nousemaan ja auttamaan toinen toistansa lähteen reunalle juomaan sen raikasta vettä, kuulemaan linnun laulua, nauttimaan kypsyvän viljan ja kukan tuoksusta ja lepäämään kuusen siimeksessä, kuten rikkaat nyt yksin tekevät. Tänä iltanakin oli hän puhunut köyhille: "Toteuttakaa Jumalan tahtoa, viemällä toinen toisenne Jumalan antimien: raikkaan lähdeveden, kuusen siimeksen ja kypsyvän viljan luo! Estäkää rauhan tietä rikkaat sortamasta köyhiä! Tulkaa Jumalan lapsiksi ja tehkää muutkin niiksi, silloin ei kukaan ota toisensa osaa Jumalan viljasta, Hänen kuusensa siimeksestä ja lähteensä vedestä. Mutta", — oli hän nytkin lisännyt — "kaiken täytyy ensin särkyä tomuksi Jumalan edessä, ennen kun uusi voi rakentua."

Harhama tunsi Pietarin myöhäiset matkat ja hänen ajatuksensa… Pietari oli hänelle niistä usein kertonut, toivoen johtavansa hänen sydämensä harrastukset tähän työhön. Mutta Harhama oli kuunnellut hänen puhettansa samalla hedelmättömällä harrastuksella, kuin millä

hän oli sosialismia tutkinut. Nyt hän kumminkin tunsi sanomatonta vetoa munkki Pietarin harrastuksiin. Hän oli aina katsonut häneen rajattomalla kunnioituksella. Nyt tunsi hän painuvansa aivan hänen jalkoihinsa. Hän muisti myös Pietarin ennustukset, jotka nyt olivat toteutuneet ja seisoi hänen edessänsä, kuin Jumalan edessä.

— "Jumalan rauha!" — kertasi hän vielä vastauksensa munkki Pietarin tervehdykseen. — "Tulette kuin taivaan lähettämänä… Minulla on halu puhua kanssanne."

Ja hän kertoi munkille kaikki, mitä oli tapahtunut sen jälkeen, kun hän oli puhunut hänen kanssansa, kertoi Hiiden myllystä, Nikitinistä, häistänsä ja omaisuutensa häviöstä. Pietari kuunteli häntä tyynenä ja lempeänä, kuin iltatähti, joka katselee levolle meneviä tomunlapsia.

He olivat tulleet eräälle yksinäiselle rantakadulle ja istahtaneet puiston portilla olevalle penkille. Kuun säteet valuivat kylmänä sateena suoraan heidän kasvoillensa ja taivaankansi paloi täydessä tähtivalossa.

— "Isä Pietari!" — puhui Harhama. — "Miksi ei tuo kuu koskaan eksy radaltansa öisessä avaruudessa, missä ei ole tietä, eikä tienviittaa? Ja miksi me ihmiset, joilla on järki ohjaajana, eksymme omiin haluihimme ja himoihimme? Kuinka voi kuu, pimeän avaruuden kulkija, aina löytää oikean kaarensa äärettömyydessä, jossa ei näy rantaa, minkä mukaan kulkuansa ohjata, ei kiinteätä pistettä, mihin katsoa? Miksi ei se eksy ja murskaannu avaruudessa kieriviin maailmoihin, ja miksi me ihmiset kompastumme itseemme ja toisiimme, kuin vieriviin kiviin?"

— "Siksi", — vastasi munkki Pietari lempeästi — "että se ei ole kierinyt pois Hänen kädestänsä, joka sytyttää yönvalot taivaan kannelle ja ohjaa kuun kierivien maailmoiden lomitse…"

Harhama ei puhunut mitään. Hän vaipui henkisesti kokoon voimatonna, kuin märkä vaate. Tarkkaavana katseli häntä puun oksalta öinen harakka…

Syntymäpäivillä.

Elämä on Jumalan kiirastuli.

Kalpeana istui Anna Pawlowna pehmeässä nojatuolissa vastaanottohuoneessansa. Pöydällä tuoksui pari kukkaiskoria ja joukko varrestaan katkaistuja ruusuja. Ne olivat syntymäpäivälahjoja.

Seinillä riippui useita vainajien maalatuita muotokuvia. Ne kertoivat perheen menneiden polvien edustajista. Tomuksi maatuneet miehet ja naiset katselivat elottomissa kuvissansa kuolevan sukunsa heikkoa edustajaa, joka istui kalpeana menneisyyden muistojen keskellä. Vanha kello naksutteli verkalleen:

Tik-tak!… Tik-tak!

Jokaisella naksahduksella mittasi se palan pois ihmiselämästä. Säälimättä lyhenteli se kalpean naisen elämää, heitteli palat ajanvirtaan. Pala palalta leikkeli se heikkoa elämänlankaa, jonka katketessa oli sammuva suku…

Tik-tak!… Tik-tak! — naksutteli kello.

Mutta kalpea nainen ei lukenut kellon naksutuksia, ei laskenut elämänsä putoelevia paloja. Eikä hän lukenut kuolleiden kuvista vainajien kasvonpiirteitä, avaruuteen haihtuneiden ihmissielujen salaisuuksia, ei niiden intohimoja ja toiveita, joita ne kuvat kertoivat, kuin salaisuuksien avatut kirjat.

Hän istui vastaanottohuoneessaan, kuin elävä muumio kuolleiden kammiossa. Siinä huoneessa eli täydellistä elämää ainoastaan pöydällä oleva kukka, joka kätki itsessään uutta elämää synnyttävän idun. Kaikkialla muualla tässä huoneessa oli se itu kuivunut… Sen kalpean muumion ruumiissa oli jo nuoruudessa sammua tuikahtanut elämän luomisvoima…

Tik-tak! — naksutteli ajanmittari ja kalpea nainen istui ja odotti jotain. Heikot kädet olivat vaipuneet raukeina helmaan. Ajatukseton katse oli kiintynyt Jumalan kuvaan, jonka edessä paloi valkea vahakynttilä riutuvalla valolla.

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Kello löi kaksitoista, kun Harhama astui tähän puolihämärään huoneesen. Anna Pawlowna ojensi hänelle raukeasti valkoisen kätensä suudeltavaksi ja viittasi äänettömänä pientä, pehmeää taburettia nojatuolinsa vierellä. Harhama istahti sille.

— "Anteeksi, että tulen tähän aikaan toivottamaan Teille onnea syntymäpäivänne johdosta… Mutta tahdoin käydä luonanne silloin, kun ei ole muita vieraita", — alkoi Harhama.

— "Minä jo arvasin, että teette niin… tulette yksin… Se oli hyvin kiltisti tehty… Minä juuri kaipasin puhua pari sanaa kanssanne kahden kesken… Ah, niin! Kiitos kukista!" — puheli Anna Pawlowna vilkkaasti, mutta raukealla äänellä.

— "Kuinka voitte? Olette niin kalpea", — kysyi Harhama.

— "Oh! Minun terveydestäni ei maksa puhua. Nämä kauhun päivät ovat sen kokonaan murtaneet… Nuo jäähyväiskohtaukset sotaan lähtevien perheissä… Uh! Jumalan kiitos, että mieheni on jo kuollut, ettei ole lähtevien joukossa. Mutta suokoon Jumala voiton suuren isänmaamme aseille, että röyhkeä vihollinen tuntisi Tsaarin ja Venäjän kansan voiman! Ja sitten minä jouduin pörssissä näkemään sen hirvittävän kohtauksen… On kait herra Zaiko Teille kertonut?… Ja nyt se verinen juutalainen kummittelee aina silmissäni… Uh!"

Tätä sanoessa kävi puistatus Anna Pawlownan ruumiin läpi. Hän peitti silmänsä molemmin käsin.

— "Kyllä… Olen kuullut herra Zaikon siitä kertovan", — alkoi Harhama, — "Olen hävennyt Teidän edessänne ja siksi ei ole minulla ollut voimaa tulla Teitä kiittämään avustanne ja kertomaan kaikkea mitä on tapahtunut… Häistäni ja…"

— "Oh! Älkää niistä puhuko… Minä tiedän jo kaikki… Mutta herran tähden! Mitä on tapahtunut? Miksi erositte Magdasta?"

— "En ole hänen kanssansa itseäni sitonutkaan… Hän on vaimoni ainoastaan vihkimisen ja yhteiskunnan lain oikeudella… Minä kyllä tuomitsen itseäni, että annoin säälintunteen, tai oikeastaan *velttouden* voittaa ja johtaa minut astumaan askelen, joka ei ollut

oikea, tai paremmin sanoen: ei ollut välttämätön", — vastasi Harhama vältellen.

Anna Pawlowna kävi miettiväksi. Syntyi äänettömyys. Ainoastaan kello naksahteli. Palaset putoelivat riutuvasta ihmiselämästä, häviten tyhjyyteen.

— "Ja miksi ette tahdo astua sitä askelta *loppuun*?" — kysyi Anna Pawlowna katkaisten äänettömyyden.

— "Se on mahdoton… En voi", — vastasi Harhama lyhyesti, kuivasti.

Anna Pawlowna huokasi raskaasti.

— "Tuomitsetteko minua?" — kysyi Harhama hetken kuluttua.

— "En minä jaksa mitään käsittää… Puhukaa siitä isä Pietarin kanssa… Asia on arka. Jos olette erehtynyt, ojentukaa, sillä jumalallisia lakeja me ihmiset emme saa maahan polkea, emmekä niitä oman mielemme mukaan tulkita. Siihen me emme ole päteviä. Me tuskin pystymme täydellisesti oikein käsittämään omia säätämiämmekään asetuksia… Aina niitäkin tulkitessa syntyy ristiriita ja erimieli."

Tätä sanoessa kuvastui Anna Pawlownan ryhdissä suvun vanha, menneiltä polvilta peritty aateluus, ja se helisi hänen äänensä värähdyksissä.

— "Isä Pietari tietää jo kaikki… Mutta en tiedä hänen ajatustaan", — mutisi Harhama synkkänä.

Hetken kuluttua jatkoi Anna Pawlowna:

— "Mutta menemme toiseen asiaan: Aleksander Petrovitsh on Teille jo kait kertonut, että olemme pelastaneet osan omaisuuttanne… Vai kuinka?"

— "Kyllä… Kiitos!"

— "Näihin rahoihin minulla olisi ehkä siveellinen oikeus tällä hetkellä. Ei sentähden, että olen niiden tähden pannut vaaraan omia rahojani… se nyt ei maksa puhua… vaan sen nojalla, että katson Teidän parastanne. Saanko käyttää tätä oikeutta ja tehdä suostumuksellanne pienen määräyksen näiden rahojen suhteen?"

— "Kyllä… Mitä vaan suvaitsette määrätä", — myönsi Harhama.

— "Tunnen Teidän nykyisen mielialanne kuin viisi sormeani", — jatkoi Anna Pawlowna. — "Yleensähän Te, kun mielenne järkkyy, uhmaatte kaikkea… teette aivan mielipuolen tekoja… Älkää ollenkaan rypistäkö otsaanne, vaan kuunnelkaa minua rauhallisesti!… Käsitän, kuten sanoin, mielialanne ja pelkään, että loppu omaisuutenne kanssa teette jonkun uhkateon… Kerta voisitte sitä kumminkin tarvita ja tekoanne katua. Siksi olen valmistanut paperin, jossa Te suostutte, että nämä varat sijotetaan niin, että Teille jää oikeus ainoastaan kantaa niistä korko ja tehdä testamenttimääräys… Jos suostutte, allekirjoittakaa tämä paperi", — lopetti hän, ojentaen Harhamalle valmiiksi kirjoitetun asiakirjan.

Harhama luki asiakirjan tyynenä, pani sen sitten pöydälle ja lausui välinpitämättömänä:

— "Turhaa vaivaa! Pelastettu omaisuuden jäännös ei riitä enää sitoumuksieni maksamiseen. Milt'ei kaikki menee yhdestä ainoasta etuoikeutetusta kunniavelasta."

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